

When it comes to traffic, Pfizer knows how to stop it

By Chris Gosier

Pfizer got a heavy dollop of publicity this week because of the way its employees get to work.

The company's ridesharing and vanpooling programs, and its shuttles to the Morris Plains train station, make it a model for other companies that want to improve employee morale, reduce traffic jams and help protect the environment to boot, according to officials who spoke at a news conference at Pfizer on Thursday.

"We want to showcase (such) employers and encourage others to follow in their footsteps," said John Ciaffone, president of TransOptions, the regional transportation management agency headquartered in Cedar Knolls.

TransOptions, along with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, is launching a program that gives training, assistance and publicity to companies that set up alternate commuting options. Dubbed Best Workplaces for Commuters, it's open to companies that offer incentives to employees to carpool, vanpool or use mass transit.

The EPA and local officials appeared at Pfizer headquarters in Morris Plains on Thursday to announce the Best Workplaces for Commuters program for the New York metropolitan area. Pfizer is the region's first company on the list; the rest will be announced in May 2004. Companies are eligible if they offer their workers incentives such as vanpool subsidies, bicycle racks and transit passes so they can avoid driving to work alone. The benefits for companies include public recognition, as well as training and networking to help them set up the program.

It's one small solution to an enormous traffic problem.

Such efforts are like triage on a hemorrhaging road network that's burdened with way more rush hour traffic than it was ever designed to handle. Growing population is only one reason, of course -- the region's layout creates many powerful incentives for driving to work. Many offices (including the Road Crew's) are stranded on isolated lots, with no shops within easy walking distance and no sidewalks to use if there were. Grabbing a snack, getting a haircut, cashing a check, going to the cleaners -- these are all car trips. There's simply no other way to do it.

Companies need to provide strong enticements to overcome this inbuilt incentive to drive. Pfizer's include preferential parking for carpoolers, transit subsidies up to \$100 a month per employee, tax-free ridesharing benefits, and a computer network for sharing carpool requests.

The company also provides emergency rides home, and has on-site amenities including daycare, banking and dry cleaning.

It's worth the cost, one Pfizer official said: "This program has helped improve the quality of life for our employees, and in turn, helped to raise productivity and morale," said Ron Slember, senior director of administrative services.

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